

STOPPING THE “VIRUS OF THE GYPSY EMPTINESS”: RACIALIZATION OF THE BULGARIAN ROMA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: In Bulgaria, such as in many other European countries, the so-called “Gypsy/Roma” are the target of the rhetoric of extreme right parties who are pointing at them as the main responsible for a situation of crisis and fueling hate between groups. With the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic, the already existing tension between the majority of Bulgarians with non Roma origin and the so-called Tsigani has intensified and been fueled by political discourses that urge to “close the ghettos everywhere” (A. Dzhambaski, 18.03.2020) which have been translated into safety measures – such as closure, disinfection and introduction of a system of control access to the neighborhoods where the “population of Roma origin”¹ is supposed to live. By analyzing an official discourse of this kind and comments and reactions to it, we will see how the stereotypes concerning Bulgarian Roma are legitimated by institutional voices that are alimending antigypsism (Wippermann, 2005; Knudsen, 2005, Nicolae, 2006, Piasere, 2010; 2011). We will try to see these attitude as consisting in a semiotic process of categorization and enregistrement (Agha, 2007) through which particular features of individuals are identified as typical of the group they are supposed to belong to.

Keywords: *antigypsism; racialization; enregistrement; categorization; pandemic*

¹ This is the expression mostly used in official and scientific discourses and considered as not offensive.

Introduction

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic affected our lives and mentalities in an irreversible way. In March 2020 we found ourselves from one day to the other locked in our houses and separated from the loved ones from a physical distance that video-calls could not repair. Someone of us even lost them forever. As a matter of fact, the suggestion to “stay at home” in order to avoid spreading the virus soon became a mandatory measure whose transgression could be severely punished by the law. In this way, we lost all opportunity for sociability and sharing and we started to become suspicious towards others, viewing them increasingly as possible vehicles for transmitting the virus. These “others” could be our friends, our neighbors but also individuals belonging – or supposed to belong- to groups or communities that are considered as “outsiders” (Elias & Scotson, 1965) and thus not fully participating in the society we live. As a matter of fact, it is well known that in a period of crisis – being it economic, political or in health care – the members of a given society tend to search for an escape goat to pin the blame on. However, before a certain group is scapegoated, they have to be recognized by making reference to a set of “signs” (Irvine & Gal, 2019) that are considered typical of the group they are supposed to belong to. This could happen through a variety of semiotic and discursive processes such as that of essentialization, categorization (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016), typification (Irvine & Gal, 2019) and enregistrement (Agha, 2005; 2006; 2007) that identify individuals as typical examples of a Bakhtian (1970) *personae* by choosing some of their characteristic as typical of a given category. This category is referred to by employing a specific name or by pointing to a particular place. Thus, during the pandemic, individuals living in marginalized urban areas that in everyday interactions are called “ghettos” were held responsible for spreading the infection. This idea was spread by institutional voices – such as politicians and state actors – whose discourses, referring implicitly to the category of “race/ethnicity”, have been reported in the media and in social networks as an authoritarian source to explain how the virus spread in these areas. Not considering that there are social and environmental reasons why it is more difficult to observe quarantine and hygiene in overpopulated neighborhoods, the arguments used by extreme rights politicians which then circulated in the public arena were tended to point to the “culture of origin”, the “way of life” and the absence of “education” of their inhabitants as an explanation to justify the critical situation in which they live. Thus, the already “marginalized groups”

found themselves even more isolated – physically and socially – from the rest of the population, as well as far from any kind of institutional support.

This is what happened in Bulgaria, one of the countries, according to Piasere (2006) of the “first Gypsy Europe” because of the large percentage of Roma population living there and also one of the countries with “the lower social capital and higher social mistrust level” (Balcik et al. 2013, 131). Here, a real phenomenon of “ethnicization of the pandemic” (ERRC report 2020, 9) followed that of the “ethnicization – or racialization – of poverty” (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016; Van Baar, 2017) which had already started after the fall of socialism. As a matter of fact, from the moment when the state of emergency has been declared (13th March 2020) “the Bulgarian politicians, particularly those belonging to the far-right party VMRO which is a governing coalition partner, without a shared evidence, singled out Romani neighborhoods as nests of contagion to be quarantined” (ERRC report 2020, 9).

In this article, we are going to consider how far the category of the so-called *Tsigani* (litt. “Gypsies”) or *Romi* (litt. “Roma”)² is mobilized by Bulgarians politicians in order to satisfy public expectancies for explaining a critical event (Daas, 2005) such as the pandemic. We are thus exploring, from a socio-linguistic point of view (Heller, 2010; Canut et al. 2018), how this category inscribed itself in public and official discourses which employ uncritically the concepts of “culture” and “ethnicity” in order to justify social inequalities and discrimination. These discourses have not been circulating only in the last years but are actually the result of the socio-historical transformation which happened in Bulgaria after the fall of socialism. For this reason, we will firstly explain how the social category of the “Roma/Gypsy” has been verbalized in the light of historical and political transformations in Bulgaria in two opposite ways and with two opposite goals : on one side, the European Union and local NGOs – whose goal is to “integrate” the Roma – speak about them as a “transnational minority” who need to gain political visibility, on the other side, the extreme right parties are pointing at the *Tsigani* and accusing them of being responsible for a situation of crisis (being it economic, political, health) with the goal of fueling hate among the population and directing resentment – due mainly to the

² In this article we will use alternatively the two appellations taking into account that institutional voices of whom we are reporting a speech are also using them in such a way. Especially, in the discourse we will analyze the appellation “Roma” is used more frequently (and sometimes ironically) in order to respect the “politically correct” while the term *Tsigani* – is rather employed in order to better address a public who use the term in common speech and every day life.

dysfunctioning of state apparatus – towards a specific group. We could see that in most of the cases, both discourses are conveying stereotypical representations of the Roma by portraying them as people who need to be “educated” and to “adapt” to modern society or as people who don’t want to adapt because they are “criminals”, “thieves” and “parasites” who just want to take advantage of the society they live in. We will focus in particular on the second type of discourses by analyzing an official speech made during the pandemic whose aim is to urge to “close the ghettos everywhere” (Dzhambashki, 18.03.2020) in order to prevent the spread of the infection. We will see how the speaker is using the concept of race as a “discursive practice” (Lemon, 2002) for expressing “Antigypsism” (Wippermann, 2005; Knudsen, 2005, Nicolae, 2006) or “Antitsiganism” (Piasere, 2010; 2015), a form of racism which is directed at the Roma in particular.

Methodology

In our analysis we will employ the approach of the critical and political socio-linguistic (Heller, 2012; Canut et al., 2018) insofar as they are paying attention not only to the linguistic content of speeches but also to the socio-political context where they happen. This will allow us to see how language in use can reinforce existing social inequalities. At this regard, we have to remind that:

toute activite langagiere est avant tout social au sens ou elle est indissociable de ce qui se dit et se fait avant et autour de nous, et au sens ou elle fabrique des positionnements, des configurations, des relations, des categorisations, des hierarchisations, des inegalites, des institutions et des assujettissements qui bien souvent la construisent egalement en retour sous diverses forms³ (Canut et al. 2018, 345).

In analyzing an official discourse pronounced by a politician from an extreme right party during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic, we will observe that, from his authoritative standpoint (Bourdieu, 1982), the speaker is using particular words or expressions for pointing at a group of people considered as “others”

³ “Every linguistic activity is above all social in the sense that it cannot be dissociate from what it is said and done in front and around us and in the sense that it creates some positioning, configurations, relationships, categorizations, hierarchization, inequalities, institutions and subjectivation which often construct it in turn under different forms” (translation mine).

by the majority of the population. In doing that he is not only conveying some given for granted but also legitimating them and expressing his adherence to hegemonic ideologies. We will try to recognize in this proceeding the linguistic processes of generalization, essentialization, homogeization (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016) and the semiotic ones of indexicalization (Silverstein, 1992)⁴, typification (Irvine and Gal, 2019) and enregisterment (Agha, 2005; 2006; 2007)⁵ in order to see how it is possible to construct linguistically a *social persona* in the Bakhtian (1970) sense of the term⁶. We will have to remind that this construction is based not only on contemporary ideologies but also on social beliefs that, coming from past ideologies, are already there (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016). This analysis will help us at "investigating 'Roma' as a construction, asking for whom it is important, when, why and where, is a useful way to investigate claims and positions taken by public (politicised) discourses, moving the question from 'who is Roma'? To 'who defines who is Roma, why and what for?'" (Tremlett, 2009, quoted in Kóczé A., Messing V. and Tremlett A., 2017, 6). The issue will be thus to link the effects of the linguistic processes quoted above with social processes such as racialization (Van Baar, 2017; Mazouz, 2020) marginalization and ghettoization (Powell and Level, 2015) that can be seen both as practical consequences of public discourses or as social phenomena that need to be justified by them. Finally, we will ask ourselves how the circulation of these discourses affect individuals in their everyday life alimentering hate and social tensions between supposed "ethnic groups".

Part 1: Historical background:

Before analyzing some processes of enregistrement (Agha, 2005, 2006, 2007) concerning the so-called *Tsigani* or *Romi* in Bulgaria, it is important to understand the socio-historical events that brought about the emergence

⁴ Defined as "the property of signs (no matter which one) to enter in contact with its context (Silverstein, 2003; 2006).

⁵ Enregisterment is defined as a "process, namely a social regularity of recognition whereby linguistic (and accompanying nonlinguistic) signs come to be recognized as indexing pragmatic features of interpersonal role (persona) and relationship (Agha 2005, 57).

⁶ "For Bakhtine (1981) a persona is an imaginary speaker who is supposed to speak and act in a specific way in an heteroglossic world made of different speakers. This personae, and social attributes that are associated to them, are indexed in a conventional way by social voices, meaning typified linguistic forms associated to some specific styles which are socially perceived as distinguished from others opposite to them." (Telep 2019, 54).

of this figure. First of all, we have to remind that the Roma have been living in Bulgaria since the period of the Ottoman rule (XIV-XX century) when they occupied a liminal position (Piasere, 2015) in society. As a matter of fact, at that time the Roma, known under the name of *Çingené*, used to fill economic niches (Marushiakova and Popov, 2013) by doing jobs that not appealed to the rest of the population, such as horse-traders, musicians, blacksmiths and iron mongers. As the rest of the population, they were separated among those who converted to Islam and those who remain Christian, who had to pay the tax like any other “non-believers”. Moreover, they were also separated among nomads (doing mainly trading activities) and settled. The latter used to live in specific *mahalle*⁷, administrative units organized on the principle of ethnic separation of groups (similarly, there was for example the Armenian, the Jewish, the Greek neighborhoods and so on). With the beginning of the “National Revival” period (1762-1878), many Roma took part to the revolutionary movement and started to fight for a recognition of their rights as citizens. Moreover, in some urban centers such as Sliven a true new Roma working class started to take shape and to be employed in the local textile industry. However, it was during the socialist time (1948-1989) that, with the rapid urbanization of the country, the majority of the Roma settled in towns and abandoned their “nomadic way of life”. It is also in this period that state authorities started to take specific measures towards this “section of the population” and that common representations and stereotypes regarding them were reinforced. As a matter of fact, during the first period of the regime (1948-1956) the Roma were regarded by state authorities as a nationality (*nationalnost*) with a specific language and traditions which needed to be preserved and in the second period (1956-1989) as an “indistinguishable part of the Bulgarian population” (Todor Zhivko quoted in Marushiakova and Popov, 2004) that needed to be “civilized” by means of drastic measures such as forced sedentarization, changing of Turkish names⁸ into Bulgarians one and prohibition from speaking their “mother tongue” in public.

After 1989, the fall of socialism and the “transition” from state economy to a free market economy meant that social differences and inequalities reappeared again or – more precisely – became more visible. As Sabkova (2014) observed “former communist[...] redistributed the country’s economic resources for their

⁷ Turkish word meaning literally “neighborhood” but today often used for pointing more specifically to the Roma neighborhoods.

⁸ Many Roma during the Ottoman Empire adopted, together with Islam religion, Muslim traditions and names.

own private gain, causing the social ghettoisation of a significance segment of the population” (ibid., 96). As a matter of fact, the closure of state factories and agricultural cooperatives left low skilled workers and farmers (most of Roma origin) who were working there unemployed and without realistic opportunities in a competitive labor market requiring qualifications and specialization. They were thus obliged to find other sources of income such as the informal economy, social benefits and migration, especially to Western European countries.

It is exactly at this moment that the discourse on “Gypsies” and “Gypsiness” started to circulate and their “inscription [...] in the new capitalistic rhetoric according to which human beings are valued for their profitability and productivity” (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016, 179, translation mine) allowed general attitudes towards them to change from indifference to resentment. This discourse inscribe itself in the “ethnicisation – or racialization – of poverty” (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016; Van Baar, 2017), a process through which social phenomena, such as poverty and marginalization, are explained through the lens of a supposed “race” or “ethnicity”. In many Bulgarian towns all those who remained (or returned) living in the downtown neighborhoods where previously factory workers of supposed different “ethnic origin” such as Roma, Turkish and Bulgarians, etc. lived together were directly labeled as *Tsigani* and the places where they lived as *Tsiganski geta* (“Gypsy ghettos”). This appellation is often contested and avoided by the inhabitants who continue to speak about their neighborhood as *mahala* or *kvartala* and who, in some cases, do not to identify themselves as *Tsigani* choosing a «preferred identity” (Marushiakova-Popov, 2006) which is considered less offensive. This is the case of many inhabitants of Stolipinovo, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Plovdiv which has become famous as “the largest ghetto in Europe” (Peseckas & Kuntz, 2009). If the neighborhood represented “a vivid example of a social engineering project during the socialist regime in the Socialist Republic of Bulgaria” (Panchev 2020, 4) where Roma, Turks and Bulgarians working in the state factories nearby, were living together according to the principle of *komşuluk*⁹, in 1990 with the beginning of the *demokratiya* (litt. democracy), it was subjected to a gradual removal and relocations of many of the inhabitants (ibid., 4), mainly of the so-called “ethnic” Bulgarians. Those who stayed were mainly Turkish and Roma families that found themselves in such a poverty that they couldn’t afford to move somewhere else.

⁹ Turkish word meaning “good neighborhood”.

By taking into account the social transformations that happened after the fall of socialism, many local sociologists and anthropologists (Ilieva & co, 2019; Panchev, 2020; Pamporov, 2023; Venkov, 2022) have pointed out that Stolipinovo as well as many other neighborhoods – such as Nadezhda in Sliven, Karmen in Kazanlak, Rayna Knyaginya in Yambol, Fakulteta and Filipovtsi in Sofia – are not exactly “ghettos” in the sense of Wacquant¹⁰ because the social exclusion of their inhabitants is not due to their supposed “ethnicity” but rather to their social position, profession and income. It is not because they are considered as *Tsigani* that they leave there but rather it is because they leave there that, according to the process that in the socio-linguistic and semiotic analysis is called indexicality (Silverstein, 1998; 2003; 2006), they are automatically labeled as *Tsigani*. It would thus be better to describe these neighborhoods as “ghettoized urban structures characterized by deteriorated housing, poor technical and social infrastructure, poor public transport access, chaotic planning of housing units and so forth” (Ilieva & co, 2019, 120) and to use the concept of ghetto as a “cultural and cognitive constellation (values, mindset or mentality)” (Wacquant, 2012) that explain the dynamic process through which stigmatization and social exclusion of their inhabitants is taking shape. For example, if we take again into account the situation in Stolipinovo, we have to observe that “it is not a ghetto and not at all Roma” (Pamporov, 2019, personal conversation). Its inhabitants, a great number of whom in the last years have adopted Islam – even if not always the “orthodox” version (see Pamporov, 2006) – speak Turkish and call themselves Turks, are not at all belonging to an homogeneous group but rather marked and perceived as that from the outside. Not considering the point of view of individual subjects, there but simply relying in the homogenizing and stereotyping images given by the media, the Bulgarian of non Roma origin would say that those living in Stolipinovo are not *istinski Turtsi* (i.e. “real Turkish”) but they are simply “passing” (Goffmann, 1973) as that and will continue to label this neighborhood as *Tsigansko geto*. The complexity and heterogeneity of a social space which is physically organized in different areas and where the inhabitants use different names and languages for presenting themselves to strangers – sometime also switching to one from the other according to the person their interacting with – is thus totally erased

¹⁰ The author conceived the “ghetto” as an “ethnically homogeneous enclave that contains all the members of a subordinate category and their institutions and prevents them from fanning into the city” (Wacquant, 2008, 114).

(Irvine and Gal, 2019) and individuals voices silenced in order to give sense to a unifying representation and comforting socially established beliefs and expectancies.

Part 2: The sensationalization of the *Tsiganski geta*:

Media play a big role in this process. As a matter of fact, in the last twenty years the “Gypsy question” has become a mainstream subject in the medias and in the political campaign of extreme right parties all around Europe. In Bulgaria, the supposed ‘problem’ of the presence of the Roma has become a focus of the media especially since extreme right coalition such as *Ataka* (litt. Attack)¹¹, have obtained access to the legislative elections (see Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016). Since then journalistic reports are more and more frequently showing pictures and videos where the so-called “Gypsy neighborhoods” are “invaded” by garbage but the inhabitants seems not to care. Other reports show how in these neighborhoods “children are giving birth to children” (Dikoff, 29.03.2015)¹², other focus on the lack of infrastructures, hygiene and presence of criminality. In these kind of reports, rather than investigating the structural reasons of the critical situation in which the inhabitants live¹³, the journalists blame – directly

¹¹ “A coalition [...] formed by four political organization: the national- patriotic party (*Balgarska natsionalno-patriotichna partiya*) of Petar Manolov, the national Mouvement national for the Salvation of the Fatherland (*Natsionalno dvizhenie za spasenie na otchestvoto*) guided by Ilija Petrov – two microscopic formations- the political Circle *Zora* [Dawn] guided by Mincho Minchev and the Union of the patriotic and military reserved forces *Zaštita* [Defebd] guided by general Jordan Velichkov. After an internal agreement enregistered on 11 may 2005, only one month and a half after the electoral consultation, Volen Siderov has been authorized to represent the coalition. (Ragaru 2006, 10, translation mine).

¹² For a deep socio-linguistic analysis of it see Canut, Getchev and Nikolova (2015).

¹³ For a detailed account of the issue in Stolipinovo see Venkov (2022) available at Столипиново: боклук, меди, власти и расиализация – Seminar_BG (seminar-bg.eu). Here is a quotation from it regarding the process of enregistrement (Agha, 2007) and racialization: “A British social geographer shows that the racialization of given human groups does not depend on skin color, but on a diverse set of characteristics that cling to these groups to separate them from the majority’s unnoticed and “correct” default bodies – mostly through the perception of bodies that are undisciplined and threatening (Swanton, 2008, 2010). The assemblage (set, combination) of characteristics is never precisely defined and changes over time, and the color of the skin can occupy a significant place in it, but not necessarily. Let us remember that there are enough “Bulgarians” (i.e. members of the majority) with dark skin, but only in rare cases this puts them under suspicion that they are from the racialized minority. Often the combination of some other characteristics produces the notion of “dark” subjects – [...] If race is not a clearly identifiable biological category but a cultural construct, then racialization is the unceasing work of constructing and keeping it up to date” (ibid., translation mine).

or not – the inhabitants, whose perspective is not taken into account and whose individual voices are totally silenced (Canut, 2016). Let's now look more closely at these reportages by analyzing how and when they are showed in the main Bulgarian TV channels. A report founded by INTEGRO association and the Open Society Institute in Budapest¹⁴, has analyzed the frequency and modalities of Roma representation in the media by analyzing reportages from the national television BNT (*Balgarska natsionalna televizija*), private televisions such as BTV (*Balgarska televizija*), NOVA TV and TV 7 and far right parties private channels such as SKAT and ALFA TV. The report has showed up that these two latter channels usually report facts when the Roma – as well as immigrants from Syria, Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries – are identified as perpetrators of crimes and violence, BTV and NOVA TV have the tendency to report facts that make the Roma appear as ridiculous, ingenuous and stupid and only BNT seems to be respecting the journalistic ethic of not mentioning the ethnic origin of the people concerned in its reports. A similar picture appears if we look at the main Bulgarian newspapers. Here, as noted by Tomova (2006), the majority of articles concerning the Roma use an ironic register (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016) to make fun of them or they use of pejorative adjectives to attribute blame on them. Moreover, in their titles, they evoke sensational facts and deeds, a technique which, giving a subjective point of view of the situation (Van Dijk, 1996; 2006 quoted in Tomova, 2006) is used to capture the attention and interest of potential readers.

As noted by many scholars (Tomova, 2006; Pamporov, 2012; Canut, Getchev and Nikolova 2016) from these reports and discourses it is possible to identify a sample of archetypes of “Gypsiness” which reflect the representations and projections that most of the Bulgarians of non-Roma origin share: the so-called *Tsigani* are seen as *mrazni* (litt. dirties), they are supposed to live in overpopulated neighborhoods because they have chosen to isolate themselves from the rest of the society, they are seen as *kradtsi* (litt. thieves) and *prestupnitsi* (litt. criminals) involved in illegal activities such as human or drug trafficking and prostitution, they are described as *ne kulturni* (litt. illiterates) because they not want to send their children to school or, if they do it, it is only to obtain social benefits. All these stereotypes are the result of a reiteration of discourses that originated after the socio-economic changes in 1990 and that,

¹⁴ See the article “*Roma ot televizora*” Deutsche Welle 10-04-2005 as well as a synthesis of it in Canut, Getchev and Nikolova (2016).

in so far as they are constantly evoked by speakers, are still actual today. As a result, we can observe that in Bulgaria:

The category of Rom/Ciganin [...] is the name that links together a set of indexical stereotypes (naturalized as essences) and purports to denote a particular referent: a community, an ethnicity, and the individuals who, by being so labeled, are said to belong to it (Canut 2019, 401).

Here, we will focus our attention on one of these characteristics, that of “dirtiness”. As noted by Venkov (2022) one of the main narratives in Bulgaria concerning the Roma is that they are *po mrazni* (litt. more dirty) because they collect garbage in order to make a living and finally they “get used” living surrounded by it. In this regard, we could observe that portraying the dirtiness of one person or community as something “naturally” belonging to their “culture”, is a working strategy for justifying their physical and social exclusion and for hiding the structural reasons and political interests which lie underneath. The inhabitants of these neighborhoods are thus automatically ascribed to the very lowest level of the social scale: not only they are not socially recognized as “full citizens” (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova 2016) of the Bulgarian nation but also as not or “sub human”. It is very common to see words such as *boklutsi* (litt. “garbage”) in online comments (we will see some examples of that in the following pages) where non-Roma complain about Roma as if they are what is thrown aside by society such as people throw aside their garbage. Here speakers are enacting a process of dehumanization (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova 2016) of the individuals they are speaking about and towards whom they are directing their anger and resentment. Again, it is an effect of the application of pre-existing category and hierarchies according to which Roma are the last grade of the social scale or even out of it. These processes could become a tool for political campaign aiming at hiding the structural causes of social existing inequalities by fueling hate and social tensions among the supposed “groups” and by pointing at some of them in particular as responsible for a situation of crisis. As a matter of fact, Roma in Bulgaria are the focus of public discourses pronounced by politicians from extreme right parties such as *Ataka*, the “National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria” and VMNRO¹⁵ whose rhetoric

¹⁵ VMNRO (*Bulgarian National Movement*) is a nationalist and conservative party founded by Krasimir Karakachianov and led by Angel Dzhambaski, Aleksandar Sidi and Iskrev Veselinov. Relying

is focused on the opposition between “true” and “false” Bulgarians (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova 2016), between defenders of the country and the “internal strangers” that threaten its security from the inside. It is especially during electoral campaigns that far right parties rely on the narrative that “the drunken swarthy offenders live in illegal ghettos houses and do not pay their utility bills. They live in large family clans that fight each other depending on the interest of big bosses” (Pamporov, 2012 cit. in Balcik et al. 2013). The aim of these discourses is to put blame on the supposed “false” Bulgarians and thus satisfy the expectations of their electorate. Moreover, from march 2020 when quarantine measures were adopted, the supposed “ghettos” were pointed as true “*nest of contagion*”¹⁶ (Kirilova et al., 2022). Official declarations of such a type lead the municipalities of many town to adopt special measures in the so-called “Gypsy neighborhoods”: checkpoints have been installed at the entrance in order to control the movements of the inhabitants in *Nadezhda* neighborhood in Sliven, the town of Yambol has been totally quarantined and *Carmen*, its “Gypsy neighborhood”, has been disinfected with helicopters “as if insects live inside” (Kirilova et al. 2022, 80), in Sofia the neighborhoods of Filipovtsi and Fakulteta have been pointed by the members of the national crisis unit as those with the biggest number of infected (report ERRC, 2020). Moreover, the unwillingness and skepticism of the majority of the Roma population (as well as of the whole Bulgarian population) towards the vaccination¹⁷ has improved the risk of contagion¹⁸. Thus appealing to “urgent measures” the discourses of some politicians have been using a commonly shared imaginary concerning the *Tsigani*- that they are *mrazni* (litt. dirties) and lack of sense of hygiene – as well as the tension provoked by the spreading of the virus¹⁹ for justifying

on patriotism, they claim to be directly connected with the Revolutionary Macedonian Organization which had led to Bulgarian Independence from the Ottoman Empire at the end of the XIX century. His members also express a strong antigypsism claiming for a “solution to the problem of unsocialized Gypsies groups” as well as critical attitudes towards Bulgarians Turks and Islam religion. For further information see VMRO – Bulgarian National Movement – Wikipedia; National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria – Wikipedia Attack (political party) – Wikipedia

¹⁶ Джамбазки от ВМРО: Затворете гетата навсякъде (24chasa.bg)

¹⁷ Циганите у нас масово се страхуват да се ваксинират срещу COVID-19 – Новини от Fakti.bg – България | ФАКТИ.БГ

¹⁸ In their report members of SEGA foundation note that this idea – such as that of the dangerous consequences of vaccination (rumors said that their endanger fertility and were thus designed to eliminate the Roma population) has been spread mainly among evangelical Roma (Sechkova R., Todorova L.Y., Sechkov R., Vatembergaska L.; Georgiev E. ; Kirilov N. 2022, 84).

¹⁹ “Accumulated negative stereotypes about the Roma are used combined with the fear of the virus

discriminatory actions that are expression of a true form of institutional racism. We will now look at an example of this type of discourse and analyzing – using the sociolinguistic approach (Heller 2012; Canut et al. 2018) its sociological consequences.

Part 3: Institutional voices and their effects:

In this section we are going to see how language in use (Heller, 2012) can tell us something about existing social inequalities and power relations (Canut et al. 2018). We will analyze an official discourse by a politician during the beginning of the pandemic who – from his authoritative standpoint (Bourdieu, 1982) – is legitimizing and justifying social exclusion. We will then report some commentaries we selected from social networks in order to see how individuals belonging to the so-called ‘ethnic majority’ adhere to the ideology conveyed in this discourse and appropriate its words in order to justify their racist attitudes. Finally, we will see how the individuals concerned – both individually or collectively organized – react to their isolation and stigmatization. This applies particularly to the inhabitants of those neighborhoods who are known as *Tsiganski geta* which are portrayed by the media as covered by waste and thus, during the pandemic, have been targeted as critical place that need to be isolated and controlled. Here is the official discourse reported on the newspaper *24chasa*: “Dzhambaski of VMNRO²⁰:Close the ghettos everywhere²¹”

One thing is not clear in the otherwise correct state conduct of the Headquarters and of the Government – the souls of the couple who died from COVID 19 in Pirogov have become the victims of the **virus of the Gypsies’ emptiness** in a **ghettoised part** of Bulgaria. Peace for the souls of the buried!²²

and the fabricated lies, circulated in the media and social networks that in isolated neighborhoods almost everyone is affected with Covid” (Kirilova et al, 2022, 80)

²⁰ A. Dzhambaski is the vice-chairman of the Bulgarian right wing party VMNRO (see note 5) and representative of Bulgaria at the European Parliament.

²¹ Dzhambaski ot VMNRO *Zatvorete getata na vsiyakade* (<https://www.24chasa.bg/novini/article/8320602>)

²² “Edno neshto ne stana yasno ot inache napalno darzhavnichevshkoto povedenie na Shtaba i na pravitelstvoto- pochinalite dvama dushi ot COVID 19 saprughi v Pirogov sa stanali zhertva na virusa na tsigansko praznensvo v edna getoizirana chast na Balgariya. Pokoi za dushite na pochinalite!”.

The speech opens with a declaration of intention: using a typical modality of rhetorical discourse, the speaker says that something is not clear in the behavior of state authorities which have not investigated the death of two persons affected by COVID-19 in Pirogov, one of the hospitals in Sofia where special COVID-19 zones were created. In his statement he suggests that the fact has happened because of the ignorance of the Roma living there, especially in the so-called “ghettos”. By using the word *zhertva* (line 2) the speaker is here presenting the two persons as victims and the so-called *Tsigani* as responsible for their deaths because of their “emptiness”. We have to note here that at the beginning of the pandemic Bulgarian Roma, especially those living in marginalized urban areas, have been accused in public discourses of not observing quarantine and testing measures and of being responsible for the spread of the virus. The speaker is thus evoking already circulating discourses and reinforcing an opposition which is deeply rooted in common opinion and reproduced by the media. Moreover, by linking the word virus to the adjective “Gypsy” he is dehumanizing the Roma to the level of subhuman and sub-animal, making reference to circulating discourses that depict them as “parasites”. After reporting the opening of the speech and before introducing the second part, the journalist legitimates the source from which the discourse comes by underlining the official qualifications of the speaker :

Here is what declares from his position Angel Dzhambaski- Bulgarian representative at the European Parliament and vice-president of VMNRO. Here what he says again: “No blame on Shtaba, no blame the doctors! For these there is no **ethnicity** and **color of the skin**. That is how it should be. But think if ghettos won’t show up like the real nests of infection. Hundreds of people are living **there** in poor, weak knots, without the possibility of meeting basic hygiene standards, how do you call them, against the pandemic. A not small **part of the Bulgarians** who have come back from Italy and Spain live exactly there”²³.

²³ Tova zavaiyava ot svoiya pozitsiya Angel Dzhambaski- balgarski predstavitel v Evropeiskiya Parlament I zamestnik predstedatel na VMNRO. Eto kakvo zavaiyava oshte toi. «Ne viniya Shtaba, ne viniya lekarite! Za tiyah niyama etnos i tsviyat na kozhata. Taka i triyadva da bade. Obache zamizlite se dali getata niyama da se okazhat istinskite gnezda na zarasa. Tam zhiveiyat stotitsi hora v loshi vitovi uzloviya bez vashmozhnost da spasvat dori elementarni higienni normi, kamo li zavisheniete predvid pandemiata. Ne malka chast ot pribralite se pozledniti sedmitsi ot Italiya i Ispaniya Balgari zhiveiyat imenno tam”.

Now the speaker says that the responsible are not state representatives or doctors because they should not distinguish people on the basis of their skin color or ethnicity. However, he warns the public by presenting the hypothetical (but actually felt as very close to reality) situation in which the so-called “ghettos” become “the real nest of infection” (line 4). He directly points at these neighborhoods as well as their inhabitants – which are commonly enregistered (Agha, 2007) by means of semiotic signs such as skin color – by making use of the deictic “there” (line 4) and of the expression “part of the Bulgarians” (line 6) which is rather ambiguous. In these statements, the speaker uses the rhetorical strategy of negating what has previously been said by means of language tools (such as the “but” at the beginning of the phrase) that totally invert the sense of the discourse. This strategy – also employed in the common affirmation “I am not a racist but...” – has been defined by some scholars (Stollznow, 2020) as microaggression (ibid.). The speaker is openly saying that he refuses to categorize Roma people according to their ethnicity or skin color but he is actually doing it by substituting the biological criteria (skin color) of distinction with a sociological one (the place where they live). The phenomenon of “ethnicization/racialization of poverty” (Canut, 2016; Van Baar, 2017) is thus happening when a variety of characteristic that are considered “essential” to some populations are used by speakers in order to explain their marginalization. The speaker goes on:

I give you one more example – today the only one of the new cases is closed under quarantine with, as they say **delicately** in the media, “two of their friends from the **Roma community**”. He has inadvertently come back from the *gurbet*²⁴ in England on that day and has been incessantly circulating around the city. In Burgas others returned *gastarbaiteri*²⁵ have stormed the hospital in order to be tested. In Sliven too the municipality has introduced a **system of controlled access** for the Gypsy ghetto²⁶.

²⁴ Turkish word used also in Bulgaria meaning litt. “foreign lands” and referring to the activity of working abroad.

²⁵ German word meaning literally “guest workers”.

²⁶ “Davam vi oshte edin primer- dnezh ediniyat ot novite sluchai e zatvoren pod karantina s, kaktto pishat delikatno v medite, “dvama svoi priyateli ot romska proishod”. Varnal se e inache onsi den ot gurbet v Angliya i nehaino obikolil grada. “V Burgas druzhi pribrali se gastarbaiteri sa shurmuvali mestnata bolnitsa, za da badat testvani. V Sliven pak obshtinata e vavela propuskatelen rezhim sa tsigansko geto”.

The speaker here provides an example in order to explain and reinforce his previous declaration : a man came back from a trip abroad and he is now in quarantine. He is also saying with irony that the media use the term “Roma” instead of the more commonly used *Tsigani*. Moreover, common words such as *gurbet* and *gastarbeiteri* make his discourse more familiar to his public. These terms are in fact used in everyday language to indicate the seasonal migration of workers to Western European countries in search of better job conditions, many of these workers are persons of Turkish and Roma origin and are those who are assumed to live in the so-called “ghettos”. Here, such as in the neighborhood of Nadezhda in Sliven, the municipality has already taken action by introducing a system of controlled access. The speaker then continue with this statement:

The situation is not underestimated and we from VMRO years before spoke about the **marginalized mass** who live in these places. Today the threat is no longer only “on picture”. It is clear. For this reason we wanted the all **conception** but even today it is still collecting dust in the office of the administration.²⁷

The author is here assuming not only his personal point of view but also that of his party of which he is one of the main representatives. He reminds the public that VMNRO had already targeted the “marginalized mass” (note here the use of the term “mass” which fully de-individualizes and de-humanizes the individuals concerned) living in the so-called “ghettos” by proposing the “Conception for changing the integration policies of the Gypsy (Roma) ethnicity in the Republic of Bulgaria and measures for its realization” with the aim of dealing more effectively with the so-called “Gypsy question” in Bulgaria²⁸. The solutions proposed included implementing “voluntary” work among the Roma, introducing measures for their “socialization” and “alphabetization” as well as a system of birth control to “prevent unwanted pregnancies and reducing fertility tax among children, by giving particular attention to individuals of the Gypsy community”. We can notice here a process of intertextuality (Baumann

²⁷ “Situatsiata ne e podtseniyavane i nie ot VMRO godini nared govorim za marginalizirane masi koito zhiveiyat po tezi mesta. Dnez zaplahata veche ne e prosto „na kartinka“. Tiya e yavna. Za tova iskame i tsiyalota kontsepsiya no tiya taka i do dnez sabira prah v biurota na administratsiyata”.

²⁸ For a precise analysis of this text (as well as a translation in French) see Canut and Getchev (2019) available at TRAVAIL FORCÉ ET CONTRÔLE DES NAISSANCES DANS LA CONCEPTION DU PIRE ? PERSPECTIVES DE RÉPRESSION POLITIQUE DES ROMS EN BULGARIE. | SOCIOLINGUISTIQUE POLITIQUE (hypotheses.org)

& Briggs, 1990; 1992) insofar as one text refers to another by a system of direct or indirect quotations. The speaker continues as follows:

Yes, it is normal in these moments not to separate people according to their ethnicity and place of residence. Nor to pit one **part of the Bulgarian citizens** against the other. And you will not hear me speak this way. But I would like to remind you that it is matter of this **part of the population** about whom we from VMNRO warned years ago that hardly get used to assume any responsibilities. For this reason a special attention and restrictions are needed. Many mayors have started to adopt a control system in the ghettos by dividing them into "sections". Such an idea was born in the neighborhood of "Istochen" in Plovdiv and it is now time for it to become an "official measure" in the country.²⁹

Again, the speaker declares his refusal of making use of racial/ethnic criteria of differentiation by reassuring his audience that he will not speak in these terms. However, the "but" (line 2) as the beginning of a new statement has the same effect of before: he is negating what he has just said by showing first what he is now using as criteria of differentiation: the "ethnicity" and "living place". Thus, he is doing exactly the opposite of what he is declaring. Even the expression "part of the Bulgarian citizens" (line 2) is highly ambiguous: from one hand, he recognize the Roma as Bulgarians but, on the other, he is separating them as a "part" that needs special attention and has to be regulated through special measures. He then shows us the pragmatic effects of speeches which, like his own, call for "closing the ghettos everywhere": in the "Istochen" district in Plovdiv, the mayor has introduced a system of control at the entrance to the neighborhood and divided it into zones. He has thus put into practice the ideology conveyed in the discourse: dividing people according to arbitrary criteria of differentiation in order to better control them. It is now the turn of the journalist who close his article by reminding us of the titles of the speaker in order to stress the authoritative character of his declaration:

²⁹ „Da normalno e v takiva momenti da ne delim horata po etnos i mestozhiveene. Nito da nastroi-vame edna chast ot balgarskite grazhdani srezhdu druga. I nyama da me chuete da govoriya po тази posoka. No iskam da zapomniya che tuka stava vaproz za onasi chast ot naselenieto za koyato nie ot VMNRO godini nared preduprezhdavame che na trudno svikva s otgovornostite. Zatova I tam tryadva spetsialno vnimanie I restrikti. Mnogo kmentove zapochnaha da vavezhdat propuskatelen rezhim kam geta "na parche". Takava ideiya se zarodi v kvartal "Iztochen" v Plovdiv. Vreme e tova da stane ofitsialna miyarka na vsiyakade v stranata“.

That is why this vice president of VMNRO and representative of the organization of all Bulgarians at the European Parliament suggests the National Operational Headquarters introduce a **pass-system for the ghettos** as a national security measure. If the serious spread of the pandemic in a ski-resort is possible, imagine what would happen if the infection spread in the ghettos. And after Bansko is quarantined, what will stop the closure of the ghettos?³⁰

Moreover, the journalist, not challenging at all the speaker, aims at proving that his declaration is verifiable by recalling an event that has just occurred (the quarantine measures adopted in the ski resort town of Bansko³¹ because of the spreading of the infection) and then comparing that situation with a hypothetical similar one in the ghettoized neighborhoods. However, he invites us to make this comparison without any contextualization.

After this analysis, we should consider briefly how this discourse and similar ones have influenced public opinion of the majority of the “ethnic” Bulgarians. We will do so by reporting some online comments which appeared on social networks as well as on the free space left for commentaries on journals or blog websites. We have selected these comments by using the keyword *Tsigani* and then according to the date of publication :

— Anonymous: “Nobody can stop the virus of gypszation, it is too late!” (Fakti, 2020)³²

— Anonymous: “The small *Tsig@nin* is not like a person!”(Fakti, 27.06.2021)³³.

— Bai Grozdan: “What can you expect from some people that live on very low municipal rents in the block number 20 in Yambol and they don’t even pay these rents, and they directly take out the windows and they almost break them (DW 10.05.2020) they have brought a horse to the 4th floor”.³⁴

³⁰ Eto sashto тази заместник-председател на VMNRO и представител на оргнизацията и на всички българи в Европейския парламент предлагам на Националната оперативен сhtаб да введе пропускателен режим за getoto като национална миyарка. След като e vazhmozhno seriozno razprostranenie na zarazata v ski kurort , pomislite samo kakvo shte stane, ako plamne zaraza v edno geto. Izled като e blokirano Bansko, kakvo spira blokadata na getata?

³¹ For more information regarding this fact as well as for a sociological and anthropological lecture of the event see Maeva and Erolova (2023) “Bulgarian Roma and the Dawn of the Covid 19 Pandemic” available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/12/4/208/pdf?version=1680519415>

³² „*Nikoi ne mozhe da spre viruza na tsiganizatsiyata, kazno e veche!*”

³³ „*Tsig@nino ne e kato chovek!*”

³⁴ Bai Grozdan: „*Kakvo mozhe da ochakvate ot razni individi koito ghi nastaniha na nishozhni*”

- Anonymous: "Not a *mangal*³⁵ died of covid. It's a pity!"³⁶(Fakti 27.06.2021)
- Hitler: "The dirty Gypsies to hell, come to gas chambers, you garbage."³⁷(Fakti, 27.06.2021)
- Vaccinated= Sterile: "But these Gypsy haven't died in this terrible covid fever. Apparently, the three D are strictly observed in their ghettos and neighborhoods, hein? Disinfection, distance and discipline in all the ghettos : D This is the only way for the Gypsies to survive covid!"³⁸ (Fakti, 27.06.2021)

In these commentaries the speakers are openly expressing their Antigypsism (Wippermann, 2005; Knudsen, 2005, Nicolae, 2006, Piasere, 2010; 2011), some of them are also adhering to a hygienistic discourse according to which the Roma has to be eliminated, if necessary, by employing the Nazi-style gas chambers. These statements show their adherence to a racist ideology which in the past has led to the extermination of population because of their supposed "ethnicity" by appropriating discourses circulating both in the past and in the present in which the Roma are totally de-humanized. The speakers in fact motivated their hate towards the Roma by referring to the stereotypical images in which they are all portrayed in the same way: living in overpopulated neighborhoods, not paying rents, not observing hygienic norms, etc. As we have seen, these stereotypes have been reemployed during the pandemic in order to better justify the specific measures which have been implemented in the so-called "Gypsy/Roma ghettos".

We will now look at the reactions of some of the individuals concerned by these discourses and who experience discrimination, stereotyping and exclusion in their daily lives. Some of the inhabitants of the so-called "ghettos" denounce quite overtly institutional and environmental racism (Dunajeva and Kostka 2022) blaming the municipality for the large amount of waste in their neighborhood and argue that they are totally left aside by institutions or rather

obshtinski naemi v blok 20 v Yambol, a te dori i tezi naemi ne plashtaha, a napravo izkartiha dogramata i pochti gho razryshiha https://webnews.bg/uploads/images/14/4214/104214/orig.jpg?_=1446798402 – kato na 4tya etazh dazhe byaha kachili kon! (DW 10.05.2020).

³⁵ Litt. "coal stoves" highly offensive term used to point at the Roma by referring to the darkness of their skin.

³⁶ XX: "*Niyama umriyal ot kovid m.ngal. Zhalko!*"

³⁷ Hitler: „*Eghati strahlivite tsigani, aide v gazovata kamera izmekyari*"

³⁸ Vaksiniran=Sterilen „*Ama ne izmryaha tiya tsigani ot tozi strashen kovidogrip. Yanvno b getata I mahalite im se spazvat striktno trite D, a? Desinfektsiya, Distantsiya et Discipline vav vsiyako geto : D Samo taka tsignanite otseliyavat ot koronkata!*

treated as scapegoats during times of crisis (such as that of the pandemic) and during the elections. This is what happened for example in the neighborhood of Stolipinovo in Plovdiv where the inhabitants have tried to organize themselves in the community for collecting garbage and also created an online space for discussion on Facebook. We will present here some comments that appeared on the Facebook page “*zhitelite na Stolipinovo*”³⁹ (litt. “residents of Stolipinovo”) as well as a video – to which a reference is made on the page itself- where Dzhambaski launched bombs against protesters who had gathered in front of the VMNRO office in Sofia. We will also report two comments from the online blog *Filibeliler.com*⁴⁰ as a response to Dzhambaski’s reaction, in one of them his picture appear with this caption:

underestimated “Racist” Dzhambaski into a s***er.⁴¹

Firstly, we have to say that the link to the comment- itself a reaction to the video⁴²- has been blocked and it is thus unavailable. Most probably because of the very direct language used in the title. However, similar, but less direct comments, are available on the blog such as the one that follows:

The racist statements of the fictional nationalist, racist and alcoholic who was caught driving drunk a few months ago are untouchables in Bulgaria. The prosecution and the authorities pretend not to hear, not to see. It is not right, it is not fair and it is not democratic for ordinary citizens to be sought out and threatened by the police for posts and comments on Facebook, and for the political elite to be free to express unconstitutional opinions.⁴³

³⁹ Сдружение Жители на Столипиново | Plovdiv | Facebook

⁴⁰ Filibeliler | Филибелии – Гласът на Столипиново – Filibeliler.com

⁴¹ “*Nedosegaemiyat ‘Rasist’ Dzhambaski pat v izdanka*”

⁴² https://filibeliler.com/2020/11/20/dzhambaski/fbclid=IwAR2JOZxDEsTM3F_Hxvd3nODotemEYF5-Jd0tHJOEbFVjnhc8L_kb25pd4xc

⁴³ *rasistkite izkazvaniya na ismisenia natsionalist, rasist i alkochohic, koito be khvanat da shofira piyan predi nyakolko mesetsa a nedosegaem v Balgariya. Procurature i vlastite se praviyat che ne chuvat, ne vizhdат, ne e redno, ne e spravedливо ni demokratichно obiknovenite grazhdani da badat tarseni i zaplazvani ot politsiyata za postove i komentari vav Facebook a za politicheskiyat elite da e svobodno da izraziyavat protivconstitutionni mneniya*” ЗАЩО ЛИПСВА СЛУЧАЙ НА ЗАРАЗА В ТУРСКО-РОМСКИЯ ПЛОВДИВСКИ КВАРТАЛ СТОЛИПИНОВО? – Filibeliler | Филибелии . The title of the article is also emblematic: why there are no cases of epidemic in the Turkish-Roma neighborhood of Stolipinovo?” However, the author doesn’t give an answer to the question.

The author here openly denounces the statements made by the politician and attacks him personally by saying firstly that he is a fake nationalist and secondly by reporting the fact that one time he was driving his car after having made use of alcohol but was not punished by the law. With this example he laments the corruption of the Bulgarian government who do not punish politicians (portrayed as an “elite”) even when they make “anti-constitutional” statements. In contrast, ordinary people are punished for much less such as their comments and posts on Facebook. He refers to a discourse about the use of offensive language in the media and social networks which is now frequently discussed in the juridical and sociological sphere. The video of the “bomb attack” made such a strong impression that a polemic started among the residents of Stolipinovo. Here is another comment:

The European deputy explained today that the throwing of bombs from the VMRO building was to prevent an attack and invasion of the building, where it is generally forbidden to gather during the pandemic as the people there could also hold their meetings online, via video conferencing. Also, the people gathered in the building were not wearing masks, which also creates a risk of spreading the Chinese virus. The excuse for throwing explosive and incendiary substances through the window is so ridiculous, as well as punishable (not in Bulgaria for politicians), that he was defending himself, that I wonder if he were to enter the building tomorrow, would he also use nuclear bombs against the protesters?⁴⁴

The author of the comment is drawing our attention to the fact that the members of VMRO party had gathered without observing the Covid-19 restrictive measures which did not allow any form of gathering. Moreover, they were not wearing masks. He then moves from a critical to an ironic tone by saying that the use of explosive substances was ridiculous and motivated by the author as a defense and he asks himself if he would use it again if necessary. Looking at these comments,

⁴⁴ “evrodeputatceto seh opravdava dnes, che khvarlyaneto na bombi ot sgradata na vmro ae bilo sas tzel da predotvratii napadenie yi nakhluvane v zgradata, kadeto printsipno e zabraneno da se sabirat po vreme na pandemiata, tye kato litsata tam, biha moglah da provedat zreshchite si i online, prez video konferentsya vrazka. sashto taka, litsata sabraleni sa v zgradata togava sa bili bez maski koeto sashto sazdava risk za rasprostranenie na kitayskya virus. opravdaniето za mataneto prez prozoretsa na izbukhlivi i zapalitelny veshchestva a tolkova smezhno, kakto yi nacazuemo(na i v Balgariya za polititsya, che seh a samootbrana val, che seh chudya, dali, ako utre seh vleze vieu sgradata, nyama da izpolzva yi yadreni bombi sreschu protestirashchite?” Филибелили Джамбазки с ядрено оръжие срещу непоместуащи – Filibeliler |

we have to say however that the strategy adopted here by the authors is very similar to the strategy used by the person they are attacking (a politician from a right wing party): a personal attack (by making reference to some events which are not related to the fact described), a moralist tone (by mentioning the fact that politicians are not punished correctly by the law) and irony (by making fun of him with rhetorical questions). It is thus furthering tension and transmitting to the Roma population the same sense of hate, dissatisfaction and frustration which is felt by the non Roma along with a general mistrust for the institutions.

Conclusion

By using the tools given by the socio linguistic (Heller, 2002; Canut and others, 2018) approach we have tried to examine how the use of the category Roma/Gypsies in official discourses serves as a tool to justify discriminatory measures during a critical event (Daas, 2005) such as that of the pandemic. As a matter of fact, the voices of some politicians expressing the urgency to “close the ghettos everywhere” (Dzambashki, 18.03.20202) have had the power of legitimizing the “extraordinary” measures taken during the pandemic which have led to the closure of the Roma neighborhoods in many Bulgarians towns, the intensification of police control and the introduction of a pass-system which regulated the access and exit of the inhabitants (permitted only for extraordinary needs). These measures have reinforced the already existing borders between the majority of the Bulgarian population and the so- called *Tsigani*, living in the *Tsiganski geta*. We have tried to argue that the mechanisms through which these persons are identified are the result of semiotic and linguistic processes – such as that of categorization (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016) and enregistrement (Agha, 2005) through which an individual is ascribed to a given category. This is done by selecting some characteristics (physical or otherwise) which are considered essential signs of their belonging to that category. Most of the time, however, these signs are selected without taking into account others signs who are not corresponding to a socially shared image of this supposed “essence” but rather contradict it and thus are simply put aside and erased (Irvine and Gal, 2019). By analyzing the discourse of a representative of one of the main far-right parties in Bulgaria, we have tried to show how the reference to some taken for granted regarding the idea of ‘Gypsiness’ has allowed the speakers (the politician and the journalist) to justify in the public arena not only the “extraordinary” character of the measures adopted to stop the virus from spreading but also

their asymmetric application. An important role here is played by the social position of the speaker (which is stressed two times by the journalist) because his voice, that of a member of a far right party and representative of Bulgaria at the European Parliament, is recognized as authoritative source (Bourdieu, 1982) by the majority of his public and this allows the discourse to become credible and trustworthy from their point of view. Moreover, he makes reference, by means of the intertextuality (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; 1992), to the text of a law that his party had previously proposed to the government. This mechanism allow his own voice to become even more trustful and respectable. As a result, many individuals who have listened or read this discourse justify the position of the speaker and strongly declare their hostility towards the so-called Roma/Gypsy. It is clear that institutional racism, even if not directly expressed, is at work here and that the concept of race, even if not openly expressed, is used as a "discursive category" (Lemon, 2002) which allow individuals to separate "us" from the "others" on the basis of some criteria which are taken for granted and which are used not only in everyday social interactions but also during a critical and "exceptional" moment such as the beginning of the pandemic. As a matter of fact, this category has been employed – directly or indirectly – for justify the implementation of "special measures" aiming at regulating and controlling the flux of people into the so-called "Gypsy neighborhoods. However, by listening to the voices of the individuals concerned, we have seen that they openly denounce the situation of isolation by the State and the discrimination they are facing everyday in social relations and interactions. They are fully aware of the fact that racism is one cause of the situation and that the utterly inefficient State authorities are not contrasting but rather legitimizing it. They are also becoming aware of the fact that words, even if not always openly offensive, can hurt (Butler, 1997) and that they have social consequences in reinforcing already existing borders.

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